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African ornamentalism

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

African Ornamentalism

by

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a child, my grandmother would bring me and my sisters beaded dolls, purses, and books from her native land of Zambia. The colors, patterns, and seemingly impossible size of the jewelry in these books always interested me. That was how my fascination with African culture began.

Today, my childhood interest has been transformed into a realization that there is an aesthetic in African jewelry that is inherent in my own work.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the design elements and technique that connect my work to tribal ornamentation. I would also like to review how I have used my designs to create a fresh statement in the realm of Western aesthetic.

Additionally, I would like to consider the social meanings connected to East African ornamental art and compare them to the societal values related to Western jewelry. This in turn will help to further define where my jewelry lies within the value structures of these different yet similar cultures.

THE AFRICAN AESTHETIC

Before I begin, I would like to clarify some points that are key to understanding this paper. First, because it would be a long task to discuss all African jewelry, I would like to concentrate on East African jewelry. More specifically, the research for this paper focuses on the Maasai and Dinka tribes. I chose these cultural groups because the aesthetic of their ornamental art and the way they utilize materials to make jewelry relates to my work.

Secondly, the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of ornament is, "an accessory, article, or detail used to beautify the appearance of something to which it is added or of which it is a part." Therefore, when I write of African ornamental art, I am referring to the jewelry and other accessories with which tribes people adorn their bodies. I will discuss my own work with this definition in mind.

What are the elements that contribute to the beauty of East African jewelry? When I think of African ornamental art, design elements such as color, contrast, line, and geometric pattern immediately come to mind.

Color is significant in African jewelry for two reasons. To begin with, color possesses a host of societal connotations. For many tribes, certain colors are symbolic of a specific social order. For example, in the Maasai tribe, virgins, when circumcised must paint their faces white. It is only after a six week period that the adolescent girl is allowed to wash her face of the white chalk.¹ White is also the color that young Maasai warriors paint their bodies during the week of ceremonies preceding their graduation into the world of adulthood. This is the last time that white - the color worn in battle, will be donned by these young men.²

Color is also important because of the role it plays as an element of design. It is speculated that native Africans actually see color differently than Caucasians. It is proposed that they have a color blindness which groups all color into three hues - black, red, and white. Violet, for example, would be seen as black, yellow as white, and

¹ Angela Fisher, Africa Adorned (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) 30.

² Fisher 19-25.

orange as red³. It may also be speculated that vivid colors are used in response to natural elements such as the sun, stars, and darkness which directly affect the lives of tribes people.⁴

These theories may explain the reason for the vivid, high contrast colors and lack of blending evident in bold, African ornamentalism. This color blindness is the polarization of light into two zones of short and long wavelengths.⁵ A direct affect of this polarization is the lack of blending of hues which in turn forces contrast. This theory could easily explain the blocks of solid colors used in Maasai or Dinka beaded jewelry. Without the ability to decipher shades or tones of a color, it could be assumed that the Maasai and Dinka tribes people naturally use beads in a way that isolates one color from another rather than mixing them together.

Perhaps the materials used hinders their ability to blend and in turn forces the issue of contrast. Most jewelry is made of leather, bone, cowrie shells, aluminum, brass, or beads. Many of these materials lack the malleability of "Fimo"⁶ for example. In addition, most of these tribes are nomadic, moving from area to area. The metalsmiths of these groups lack the facilities or tools to work metals such as aluminum or brass in a manner that is considered standard in the Western jewelry tradition (anodizing, casting, or soldering). Essentially, any intentions of blending materials is eliminated when jewelry is sewn, woven, or carved.

Whether one chooses to believe either of these theories, the Maasai and Dinka put color together in a way that is both appealing and bold. By using high contrast, single colored shapes placed next to each other, pattern is created. This design element is important to the beaded jewelry of these tribes. If we look at the corsets worn by Dinkans (fig. 1), we see that color is used in a repetitious manner to create a bold, linear pattern. Likewise, by looking at the large circular neck pieces of the Maasai

³ Dominique Zahan, *Ornament of Color in Black Africa* (NY: Kenner Ptg Co., 1984) 20.

⁴ Zahan 20.

⁵ Zahan 22.

⁶ "Fimo" is a trademark for polymer clay. It is marketed as a craft product used to make beads for jewelry. It is also used to make molds for casting in the jewelry industry.

women (fig. 2), we see that bold geometric shapes are used repetitiously to create attractive patterns.

Three primary shapes that the tribes use in design are the circle, square, and triangle. The square and triangle serve as surface ornamentation. They are used with color to create pattern. The circle, although also used as pattern, is the most popular shape used for the form of pieces. Whether used two-dimensionally as a circle (fig. 2) or three dimensionally as a cylinder (fig. 3), the circular motif seems to be the shape of choice. If we look at the neck pieces, armlets, and earrings of the Maasai, we observe an abundance of circles.

The use of the circle or the cylinder is a logical choice. It perfectly accents the body of the human body. Centuries of technique have shown that by stacking large, graduated neck pieces, a shelf is created that draws the eye to the beautiful bone structure of the face. Arm bands are made of brass, aluminum, or ivory and are coiled or carved to fit the arm tightly. In this way, the muscle of the upper or lower arm is accentuated.

For these tribes, the beauty and honor that jewelry gives to the wearer far outweighs the discomfort caused by the tightness or weight. As Turkana men say about women, "It is the things she wears that makes her beautiful."⁷

⁷ Fisher 42.

DESIGN ELEMENTS OF MY WORK

I feel very linked to African tribal jewelry. I appreciate the boldness of it. Elements such as color, line, circular forms, pattern, and tribal shapes found in African tribal jewelry are also found in my own work. I also use texture, an element not always apparent in African design, to create my personal aesthetic.

The way I use color in Cuff #1, 2, and 3 (figs. 4-6) is perhaps the most direct allusion to African usage of color. The colors are obtained through anodized aluminum; a process that renders vivid colors with a sheen. In all of the cuffs, there is a lack of blending, shades or tones. The aluminum in Cuff #1 and #3 are large, monochromatic pieces. The aluminum in Cuff #2 is comprised of wide strips of orange and red. In all of the cuffs, the coolness of the silver next to the warmth of the colored aluminum creates high contrast. The lack of blending colors and the lack of shades and tones also lends itself to high contrast. These are the qualities of East African jewelry.

Color does not consume the neck pieces (figs. 7-9). They are bold pieces but the color is understated, thus creating a weightlessness. I obtain this effect by using cool, nearly monochromatic colors.

With the brooches (figs. 10-12), I use bold color that integrates with the sterling silver. When we look at the brooches, we see that the amount of colored plastic and metal used, is equal. The metal and plastic play off of each other in a balanced manner so that one does not dominate the other.

The rings (figs. 13-17) are comprised mainly of colored plastic with metal or gems as accents. Color is again a major design element. Like the cuffs, the rings are very close to the African use of color. It is used liberally throughout the pieces.

Texture also plays a vital part in my thesis. Whether subtle or obvious, it is woven throughout my work. In Cuff #1 and #2, I used fabric to create texture. Cuff #3 and Neck piece #2 are planished to obtain a heavier texture. It is important to note that whether heavy or soft, texture is an intrical part of the piece, not used merely as surface ornamentation.

Much of African design is based on simple forms which are constructed of multiple lines. Maasai neck pieces for example, are comprised of small beads strung

together in lines of various colors that make up the collective piece of jewelry.

Like the African neck pieces, I wanted to create forms that would accent bone structure. I also wanted to make pieces that appeared very light. The use of line, negative space, and plastic accents seemed to be the most effective way of accomplishing these objectives. Line is most apparent in Neck pieces #1, 2, and 3.

In Neck piece #1, I utilize three elliptical lines of sterling silver to create a “cuff” for the neck. The lines create a tier similar to the “shelf” made when several beaded necklaces are worn simultaneously (refer to fig.2). There is also a small half round patterned plastic accent that is placed off-center at the back of the piece in order to draw attention to the neck and shoulders.

Neck piece #2 is created as a collar. Again two circular lines are the main design elements. They begin on a sterling silver plaque, pass through a patterned plastic piece, and terminate at the opposite end of the silver. The plastic serves as a spacer that separates the silver and black *Lexan*⁸ circles. The spacer is positioned to the left of the chin. Thus, from profile, the plastic points to the chin, drawing the eye up the face. The patterned plastic is curved at an angle similar to the jawline. It is inverted away from the face so as to allude to the profile. The piece compliments as well as highlights the bone structure of the face; definitely a trait of the African neck pieces. (fig.2).

Neck piece #3 has been created as a halo that surrounds the face. There are again two lines created by pieces of black *Lexan* wrapped in stainless steel. They begin in a tapered piece of fine silver, pass through a translucent piece of patterned plastic and terminate in the opposite end of the silver piece. The shorter, bottom length of *Lexan* is used to anchor the piece to the neck. The top piece of wrapped *Lexan* is long and with the assistance of the plastic spacer, is elevated to ear level. The leverage combined with the silvery, light colored stainless steel thread and translucent quality of the plastic give the piece a halo effect.

Again, my intention was to place emphasis on the face. The lines envelop the jaw and the triangular spacer pushes into the neck. It is positioned diagonally to point to the midpoint of the face.

⁸ *Lexan* is the trademark name for stress resistant plastic. This product, unlike acrylic rod for example, does not fracture when it is bent.

In addition to the brooch and ring series, the spacers are made of a material called *Xelox*.⁹ The discovery of this material has been pivotal to the development of my thesis.

Like the Africans, I wanted to use pattern in a way that made it an intrinsic part of the piece rather than a form of surface ornamentation. Although I attempted to create such an effect with the cuffs, I was not as successful as I had hoped. Pattern is visually constructed into *Xelox*. Therefore, by using this product, the issue of making pattern seem more than surface embellishment was eliminated.

However, rather than using color and pattern throughout a piece as the Africans do, I wanted to use accents. It was my goal to utilize pattern in an unobtrusive yet vital way. I wanted the designs to be aesthetically and sometimes mechanically dependant upon the patterned *Xelox*.

By looking at Neck piece #1, it is easy to see the beginning of this concept. The *Xelox* component is perhaps least essential in this work. However, starting with Neck pieces #2 and #3, we see that the *Xelox* spacers provide a mechanical as well as an aesthetic support.

The plastic serves as an important design element rather than a mechanical one for the brooches. Silver or stainless steel passes through or supports the *Xelox*. The metal helps to draw the eye to the plastic.

Xelox is the principal design element in all of the rings. The metal and plastic have reversed roles. As with the cuffs, color and pattern are the principle elements in the rings. The metal plays a minor role in the designs.

There is one last design element found in all of my thesis work. I am referring to shapes that I consider tribal in nature. The cuffs again are the most literal interpretation of this concept. Cuff #1 for example, is designed with two shapes typically used by African tribes in mind. The large aluminum disk is similar to the round neck pieces both in size and boldness of color. The silver cuff is reminiscent of many ivory and bronze cuffs worn by African tribes women. By using the star like arms that attach

⁹ *Xelox* is a plastic used in the eyewear industry to make eyeglass frames. It comes in a variety of colors and patterns. In addition, it can be shaped with a file and polished on a buffing wheel.

the aluminum to the silver, I created a new form that maintained a strong reference to African tribal ornament.

As I progressed through the remaining works I deviated more and more from my literal translation of African tribal art. I feel the shapes I chose helped to maintain a sense of African influence. In particular my works, their size and circular shapes allowed me to reference the Maasai neck pieces.

I designed shield forms for the brooches. I did this by keeping the shapes more two-dimensional and by creating one principal form with smaller appendages attached. Because the brooches are meant to be worn on the chest, I wanted to suggest a sense of protection. I believe this was accomplished.

The rings are perhaps the least literal translation of the African form in the series. I designed these pieces using forms that I do not consider totally African in context. From the forms I derive a sense of protection as well as a shield like quality. In addition the use of cold connections ¹⁰ bring them closer to the African influence.

The rings are the most sculptural and the least functional works in my thesis. I made them sculptural by exaggerating their proportions; therefore they are wearable but cumbersome on the finger. I like to think of the cliché, "look but don't touch". They can be admired and tried on but they are not practical to wear.

¹⁰ Cold connection is a metalsmithing term used in reference to joining elements together without the use of soldering. Examples of this type of connection are riveting and inlay.

TECHNIQUE

This year I have been able to identify the ways I enjoy to work with metal. It is not surprising to discover that I enjoy working in a simple, straightforward manner. Filing, riveting, and forming are the most important techniques used for my thesis. Filing allows me to shape the "Xelox" in interesting ways. Riveting without heat gives my work a raw look suggestive of not having the equipment to make jewelry in a more sophisticated manner. Forming is the means to obtain more complex shapes that required less finishing than a cast piece. Using a hammer allows me to heavily texture metal.

Cold connections allow me to maintain the "tribal" appearance that I was seeking. Although I use typical Western metalsmithing techniques, and incorporate plastics as an avant-garde material, the lack of mechanically complex connections eliminate slick solutions for this line of jewelry.

My process is very similar to those of tribal metalsmiths. As I explained earlier, most of the tribes I studied are pastoral nomads. They do not carry a lot of equipment with them. Their methods are also very basic. They use materials such as thin gauge aluminum, easily cut or aluminum wire that is easy to bend and anneals at a relatively low temperature. Tribal women use beading and carving to create jewelry.

Without these simple ways of working, African jewelry as the world knows it would not exist. The use of cold connections is a simple solution. However, I am certain that without this choice of process, my work would also make a very different statement.

AFRICAN VS. AMERICAN SOCIAL STANDARDS

My thesis has been an exploration of specific design elements. For me, I feel that it is important to keep my work as simple as possible. Although my thesis does not encompass the social values linked to African and Western jewelry, I feel it is important as well as interesting to briefly examine this concept.

Jewelry plays a variety of roles in the Western world. In the United States, I believe it plays four major roles; they are religious, sentimental, artistic, and status. Ultimately, religious, artistic, and sentimental jewelry are indicators of social standing. Therefore, jewelry acts as a status indicator much of the time.

Some Americans for example, wear large gold earrings, teeth, and chains with huge pendants in the name of status. Images of streetwise inner-city rappers influence people to believe that these items are symbols of wealth or success.

Other individuals wear gaudy pieces of 14k gold and cheap stones bought on QVC¹¹ all in the name of image. These people see their idols on television wearing expensive jewelry and want to be like them in some way. By purchasing a piece of jewelry from QVC, they feel connected to the rich and famous.

People of upper class wear tennis bracelets, solitaire diamonds, and Rolex watches because they see wealthy individuals in high profile social positions who wear these items. In much of the world, it is necessary to have expensive looking pieces of jewelry to be the vision of wealth, sophistication, and success.

My point is that our social perception of what is successful is very closely linked to the material things that we own. Jewelry is a way for a person to show monetary success. Even if an individual wears jewelry as a religious, sentimental or artistic statement, it still says something about their affluence or the wealth they possess or desire.

¹¹ QVC is the name of a home shopping network available through standard cable subscriptions. The network's specialty is low end gold jewelry (14 karat) and low quality precious stones. Their market is individuals of lower middle to lower income who do not have the financial capacity to purchase jewelry of a higher quality. It is my belief that the premise of QVC is to give the average person a piece of the American Dream - wealth, success, and beauty.

Certain African tribes are being influenced by the Western world. From the Venetian glass beads used in jewelry to the plastic toys, sunglasses, and designer shirts that have infiltrated certain tribes, the influence is visible. The ability to purchase these items is financially based. Thus, to have certain items is to have a specific social standing.

In the Dinka tribe, a young girl wearing a beaded corset signifies that she is from a family with considerable cattle; the higher the corset the more cattle her family has. In the Dinka tribe, cattle equals wealth. The corset is only removed when the young woman is married.¹²

In African tribes, jewelry has social meanings other than wealth. Married women in the Maasai tribe, wear beaded ear flaps. Pendants called *Surutra* are also worn by married women. They symbolize that she has a circumcised son. She lends the *Surutra* to her son during the *Eunoto* ceremony (a ritual where the warrior graduates to the designation of an elder) if he is chosen to be the chief warrior (the one chosen to lead the rest of the warriors into elderhood).¹³

Likewise, lack of jewelry is a sign of social standing. Once the young men of the Maasai tribe have passed through the *Eunoto* ritual, they wear no jewelry.¹⁴

Although the average American and Maasai lead very different lives, the jewelry they wear plays a common role. By looking at the jewelry an American or African is adorned with, one is able to determine something about that person.

There is however, a major difference between African and American jewelry. Africans wear a certain article of jewelry because they are at a specific social level, age, or marital status. This may also be true of American jewelry. However, some of the general population in this country wear certain types of jewelry because they want to be at a social level they have not yet attained.

¹² Fisher 50.

¹³ Fisher 27.

¹⁴ Fisher 29.

MY WORK AT PRESENT

My work is a contradiction in terms. I feel that I am reacting against the intrinsic social values that metal such as gold possesses. I am currently designing with plastic and aluminum. In American society, material such as these are used for storing food and holding garbage. There is no great monetary value put on these consumer products. They do not represent social status and hence may be considered as industrial materials.

Still my work can also be deemed as contemporary art jewelry. The way in which I choose to use these ordinary materials gives my jewelry a different social meaning. In this country, art jewelry is often viewed as something that only the elite appreciate, can afford to have, and are able to support.

My point is that although I never intended to create jewelry for the elite of our society, it has been unavoidable. Whether my jewelry is worn as a symbol of success or high social standing is questionable. However, one thing is true. Although I use non-precious materials and taken influence from East African ornamentalism, my jewelry will never possess social values comparable to the beaded necklaces, ear flaps, and *Surutra* of the African tribes.

CONCLUSION

I have come to a very important realization. When I first started making this line of jewelry, I believed that the human body served only as a form on which jewelry is supported. However, as the line progressed, I discovered that the body plays a significant role in jewelry design. It needs to be considered at every point in the designing and fabricating process and should always be complimented or highlighted in some way.

I attempted to do this by taking influence from the East African tribes because they are in my opinion, the masters of this philosophy. By using color, pattern, texture, line, and African forms in a manner that tightly fits the body, I strove to compliment and add to the body rather than detract from it. I hope that in the process of my experimentation, I created a line of jewelry that is provocative as well as contributive to the history of jewelry design.

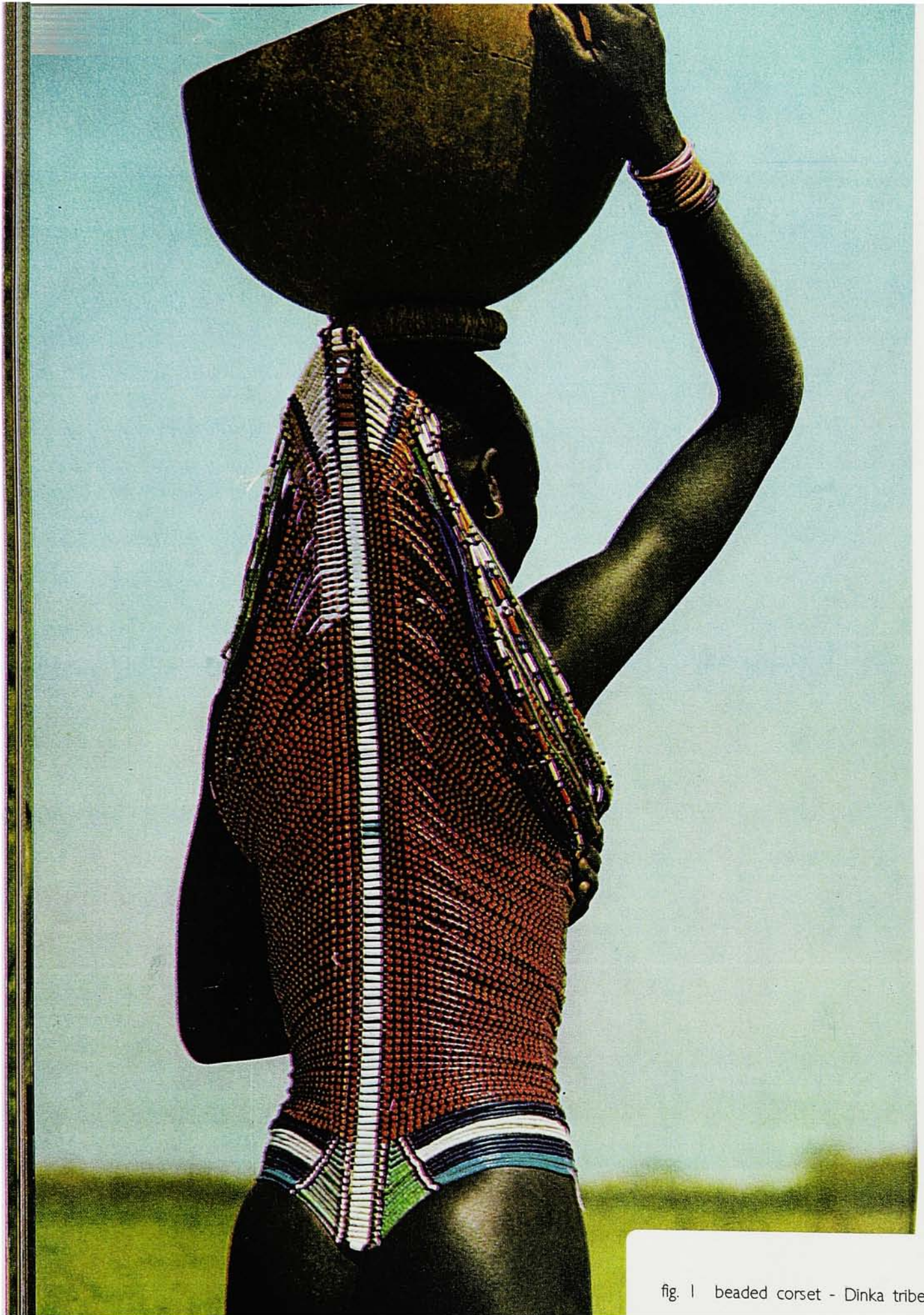


fig. 1 beaded corset - Dinka tribe

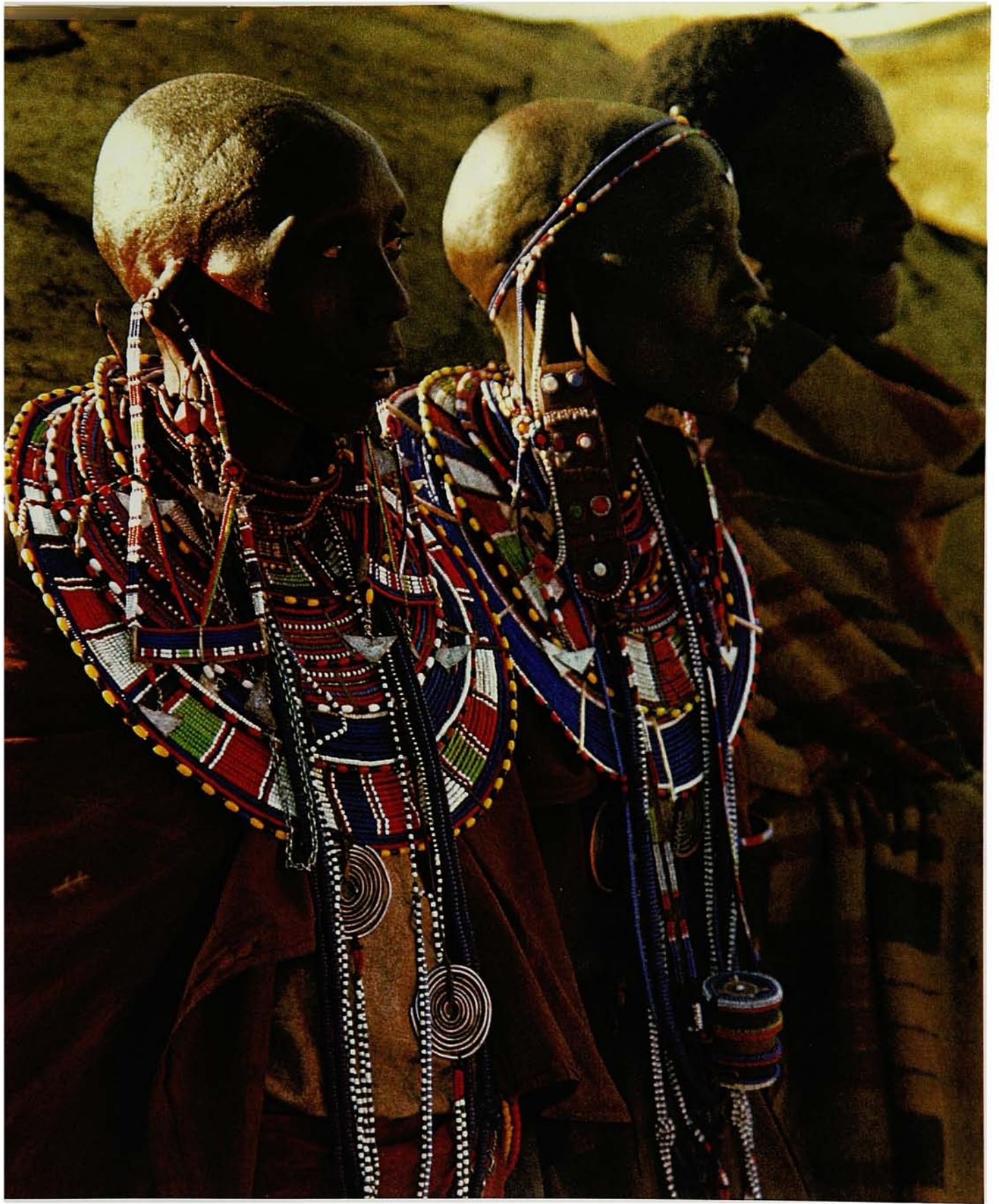


fig. 2 beaded neck piece - Maasai tribe



fig. 3 women's anklets - Gurunsi tribe

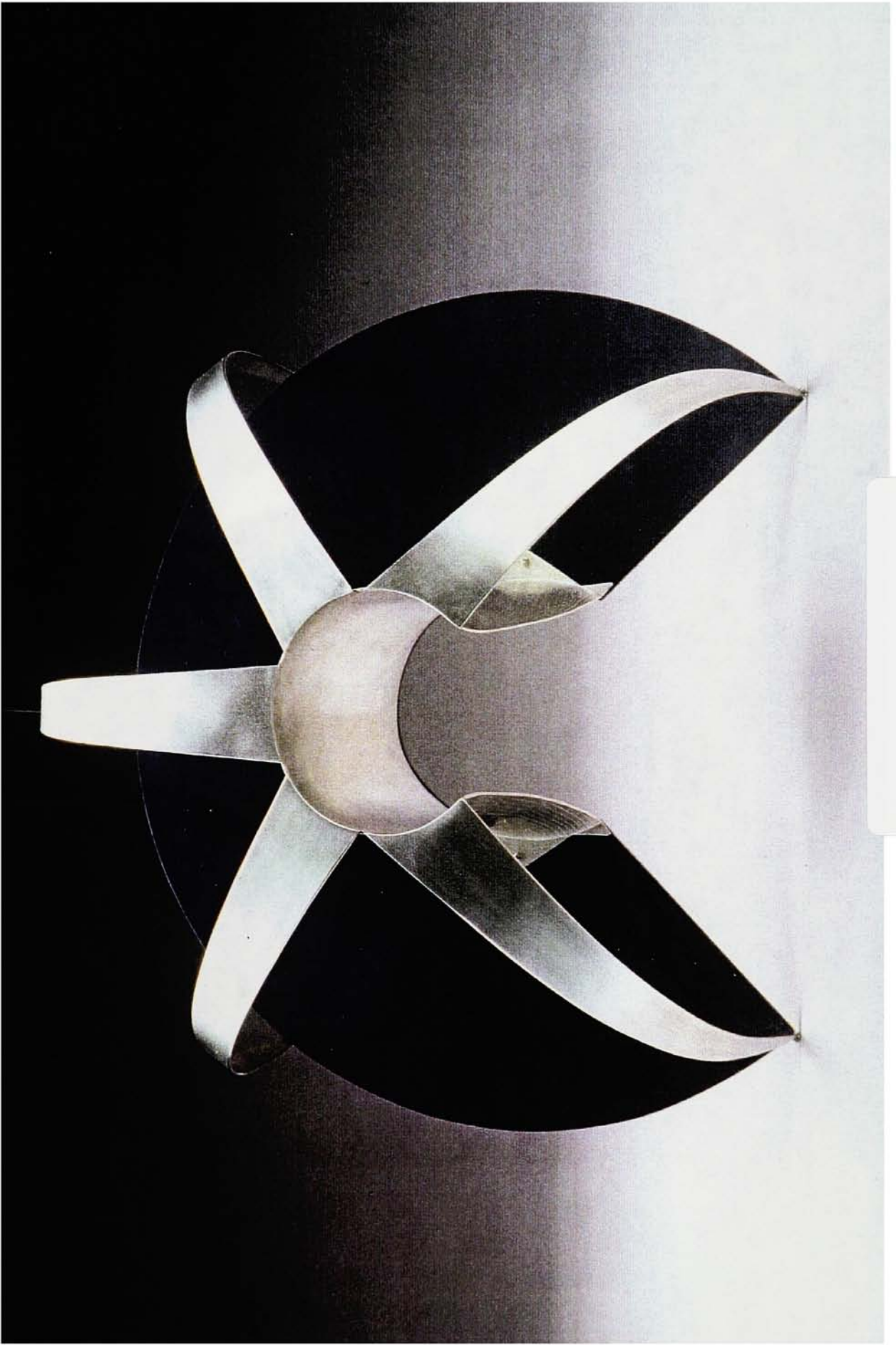


fig. 4 Cuff #1

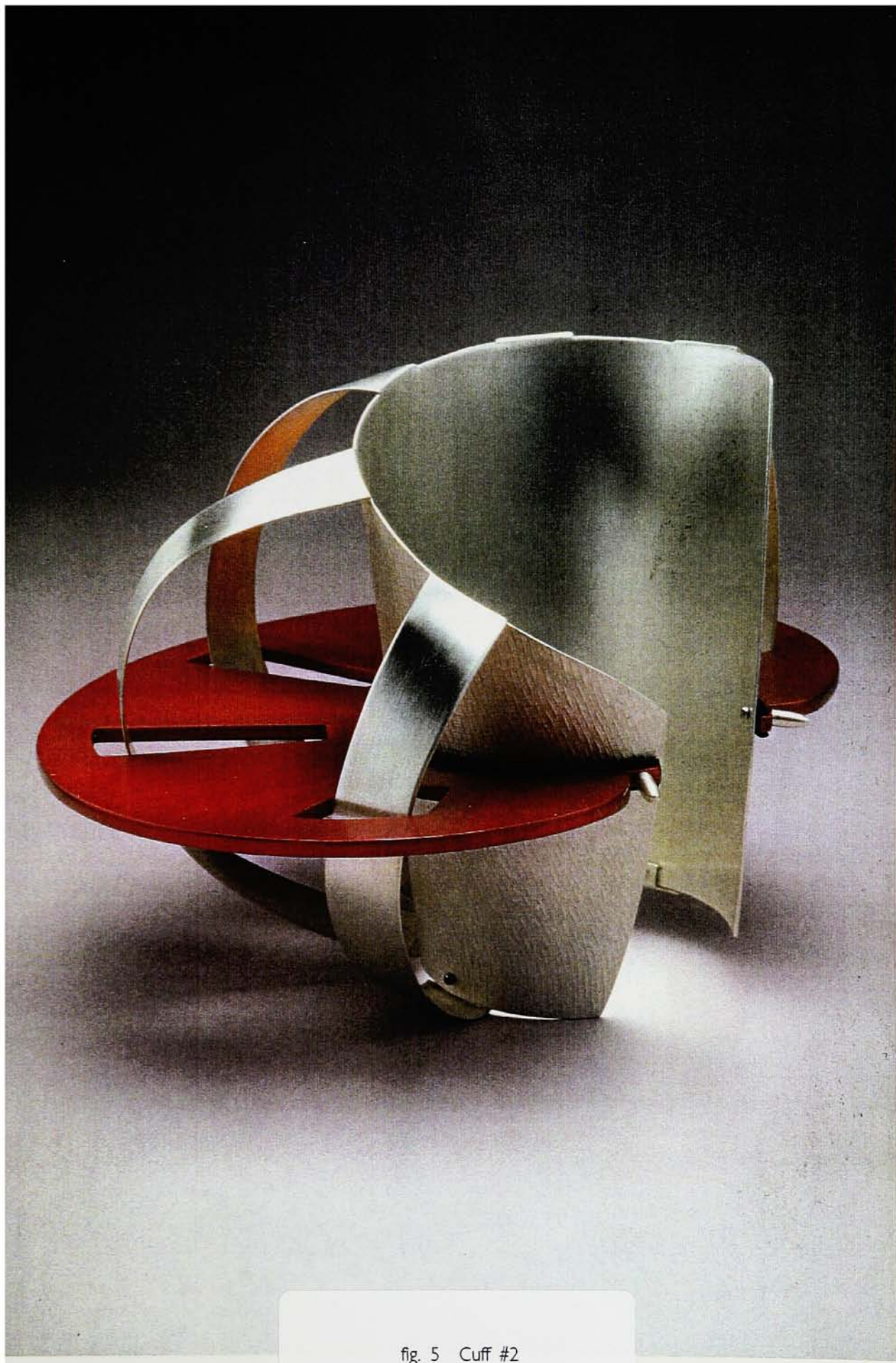


fig. 5 Cuff #2

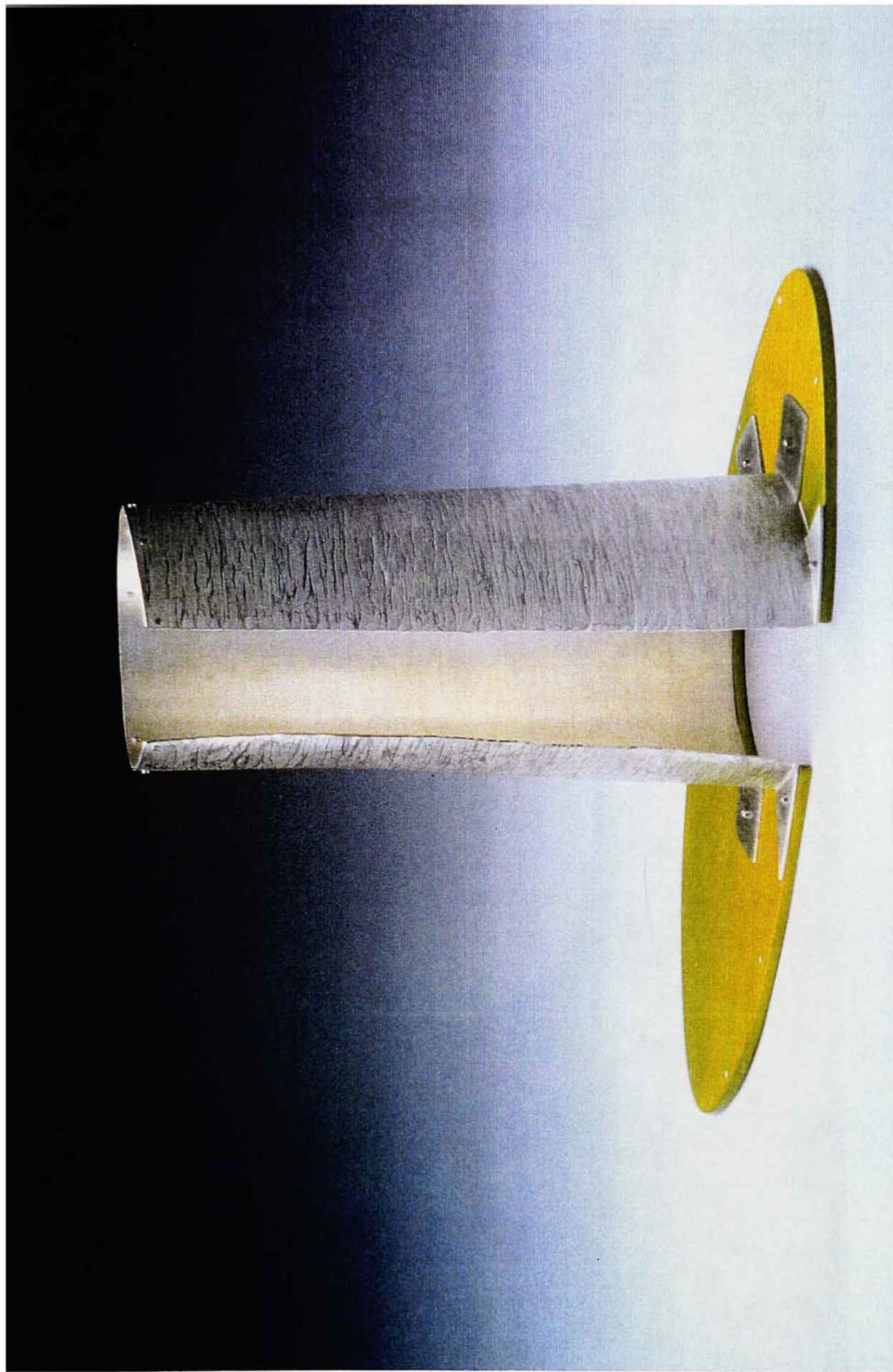


fig. 6 Cuff #3

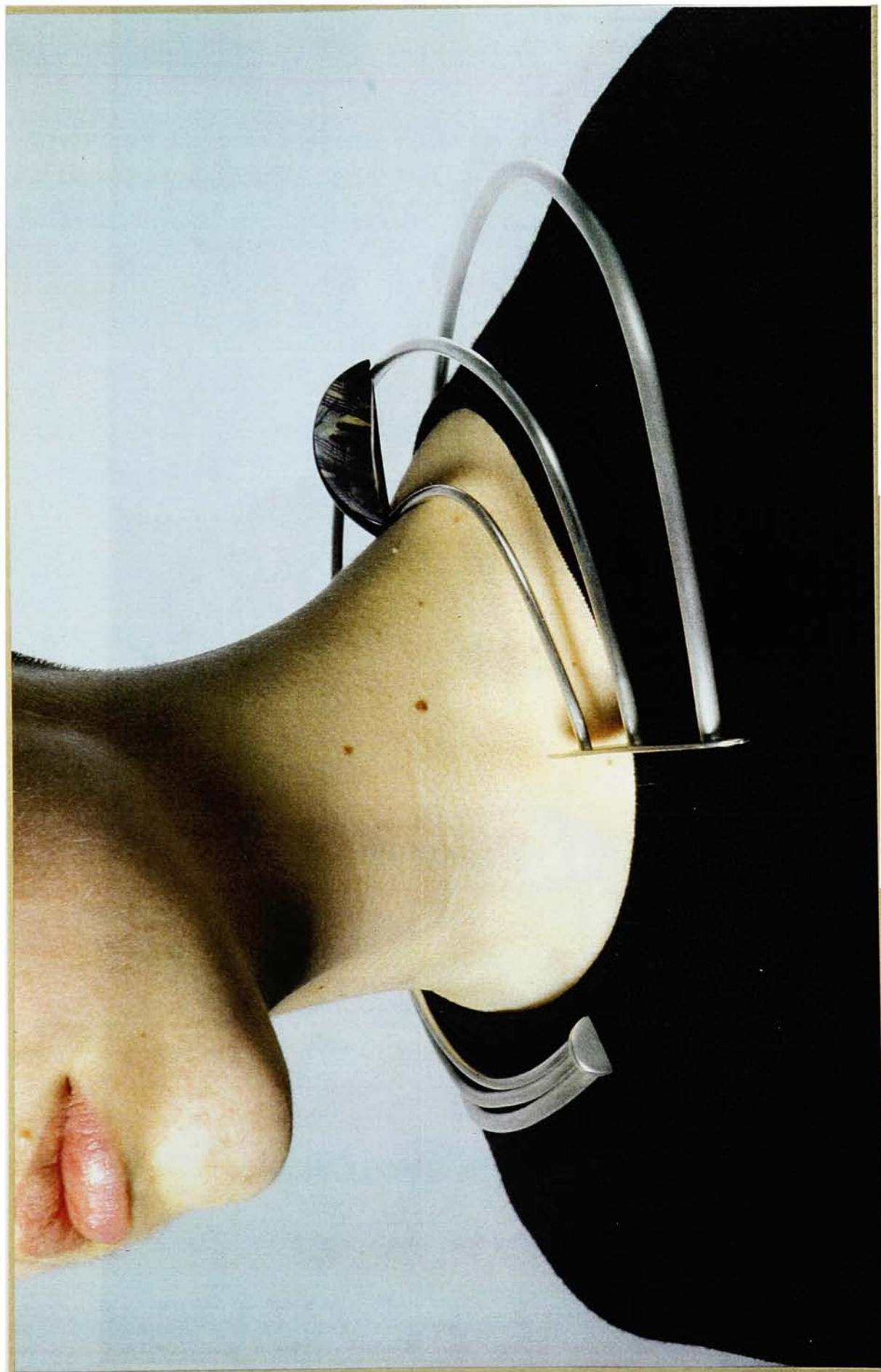


fig. 7 Neck piece #1

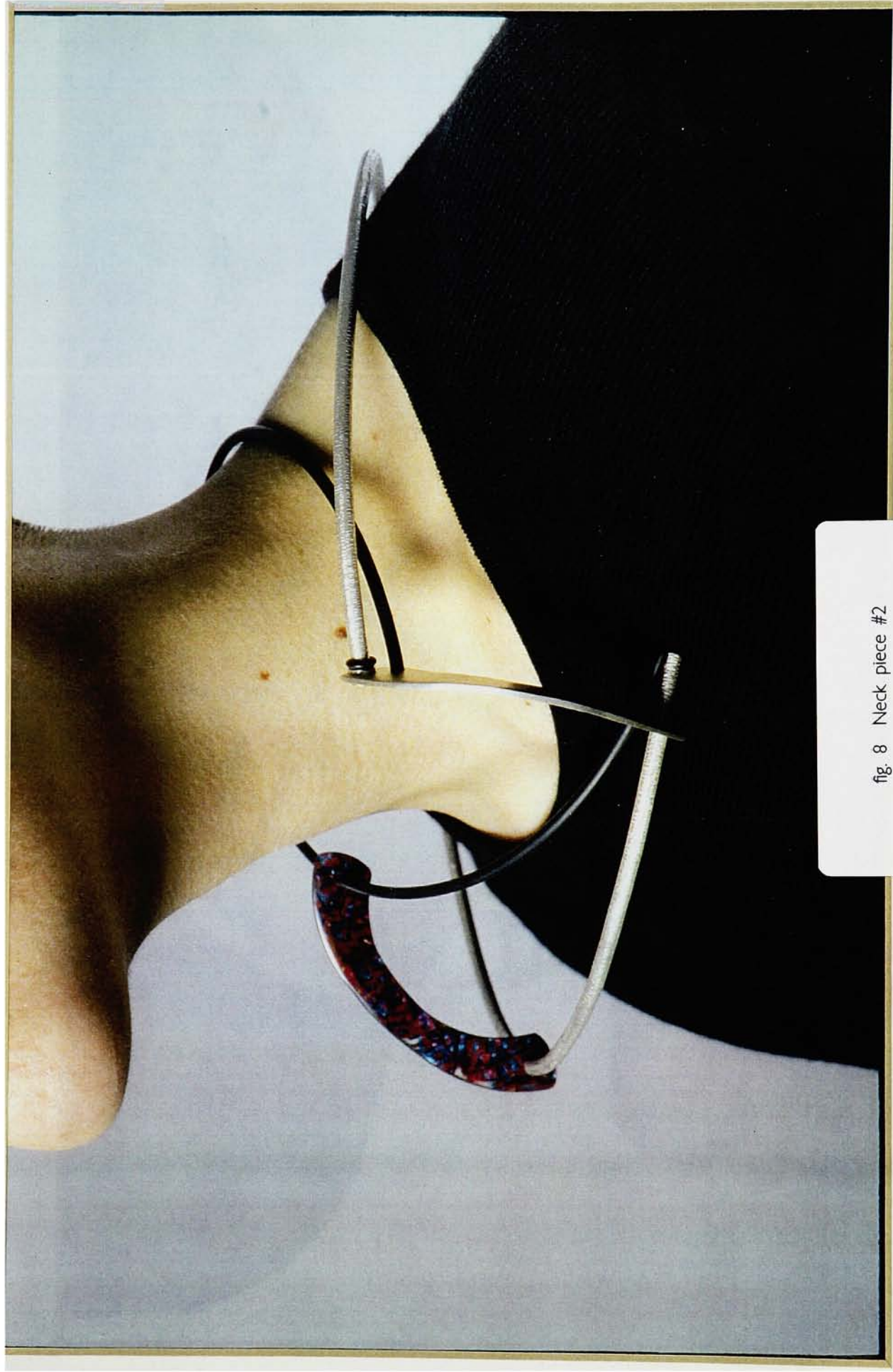


fig. 8 Neck piece #2

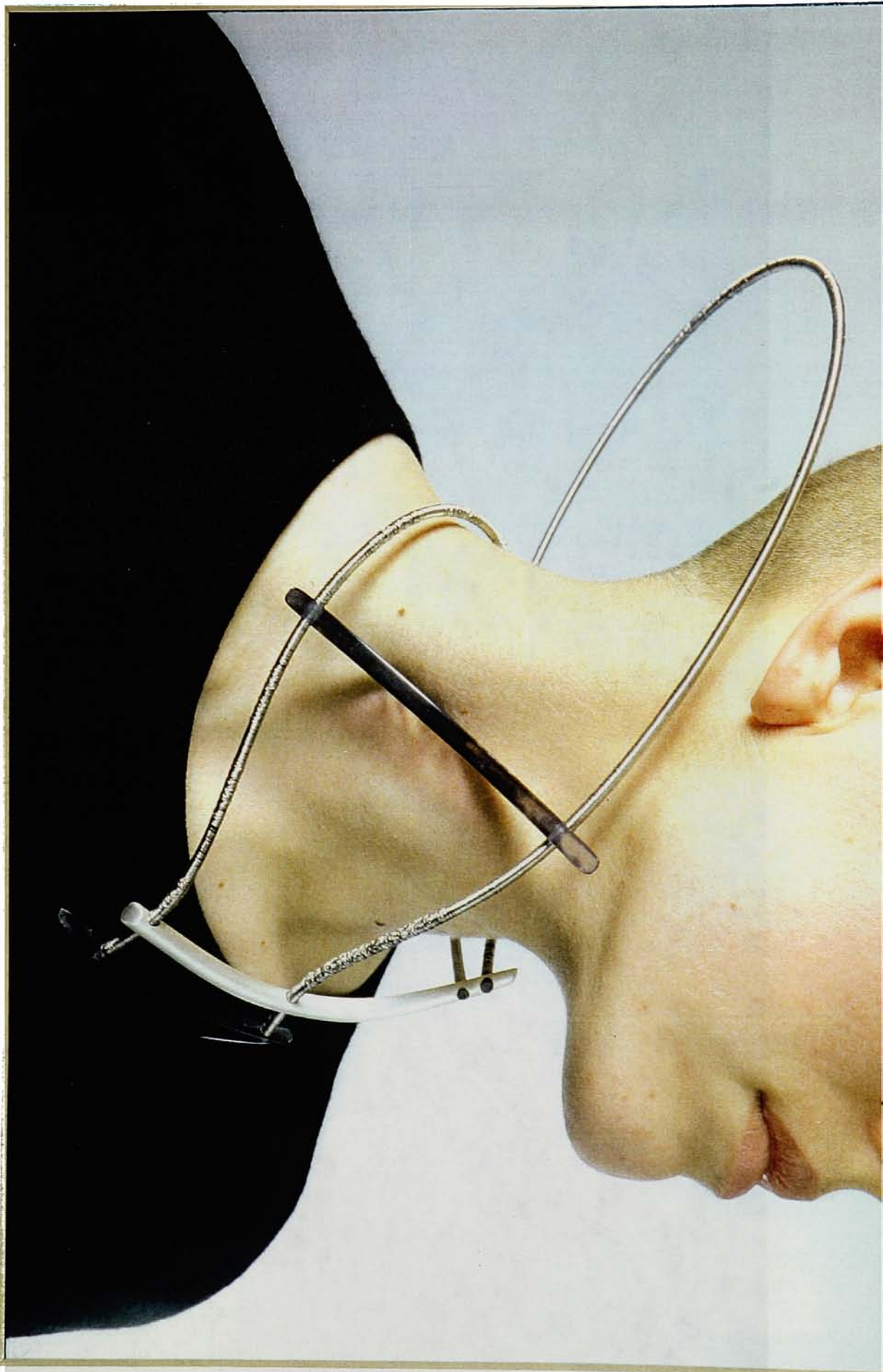


fig. 9 Neck piece #3



fig. 10 Brooch #1



fig. 11 Brooch #2

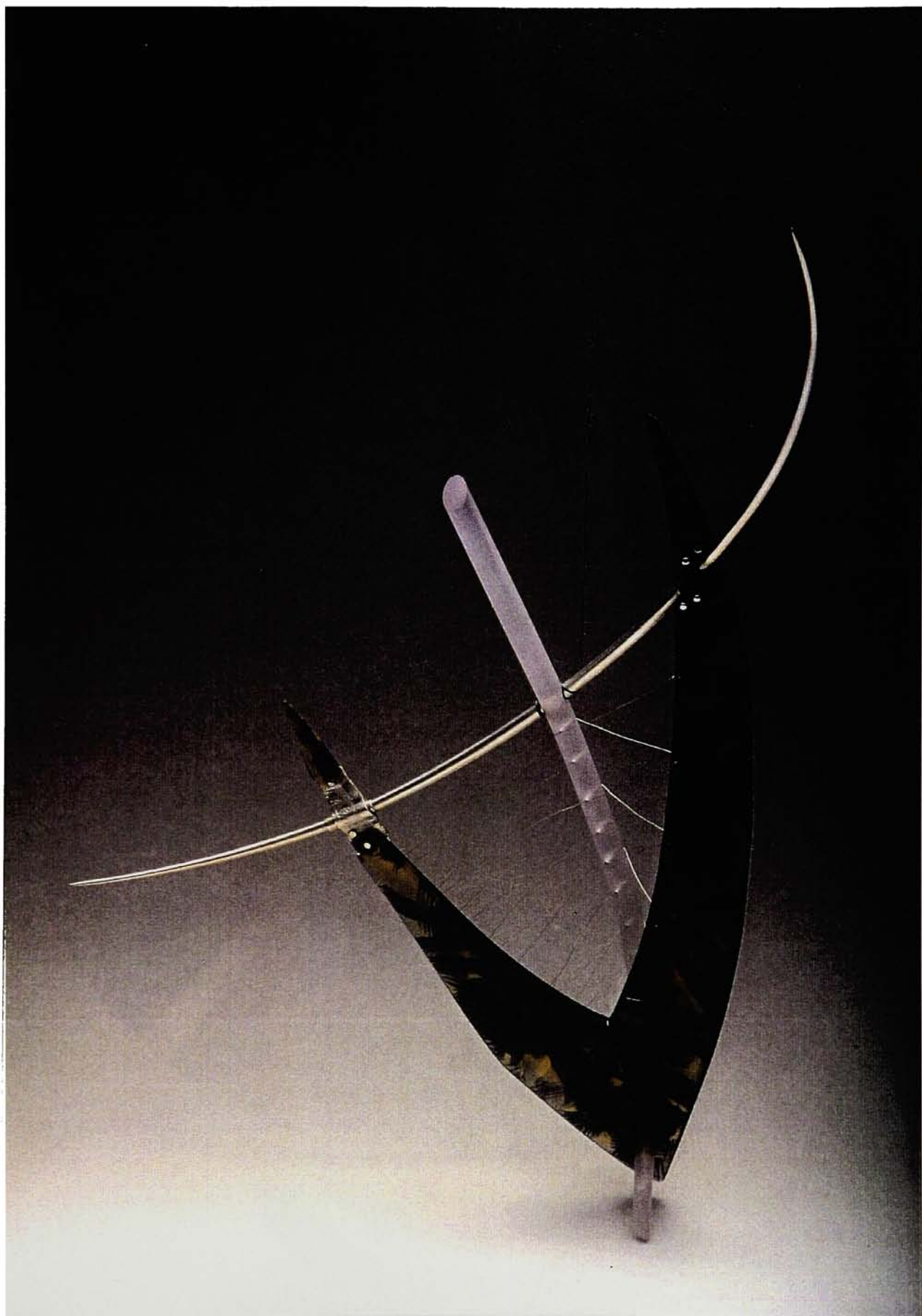


fig. 12 Brooch #3



fig. 13 Ring #1



fig. 14 Ring #2



fig. 15 Ring #3

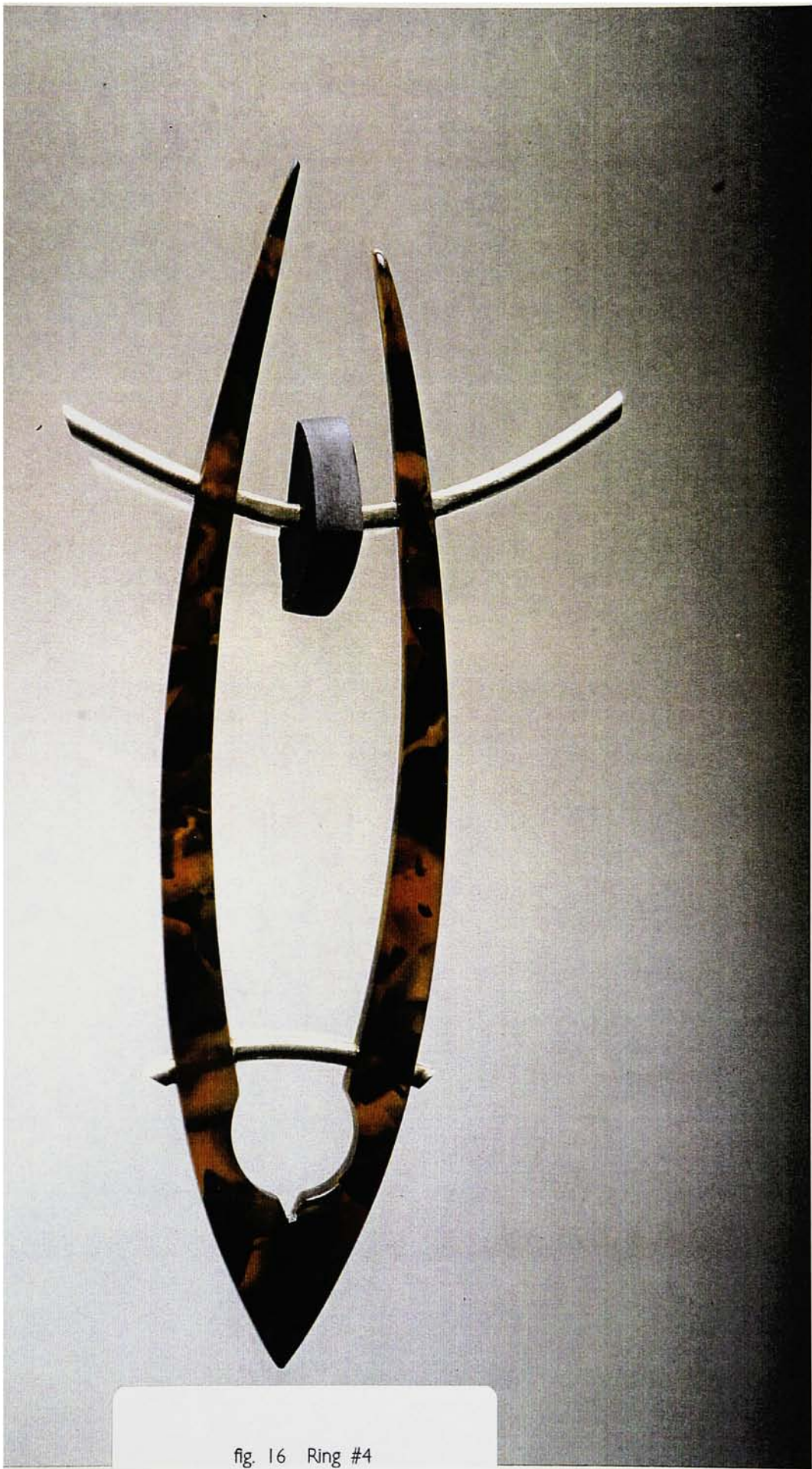


fig. 16 Ring #4

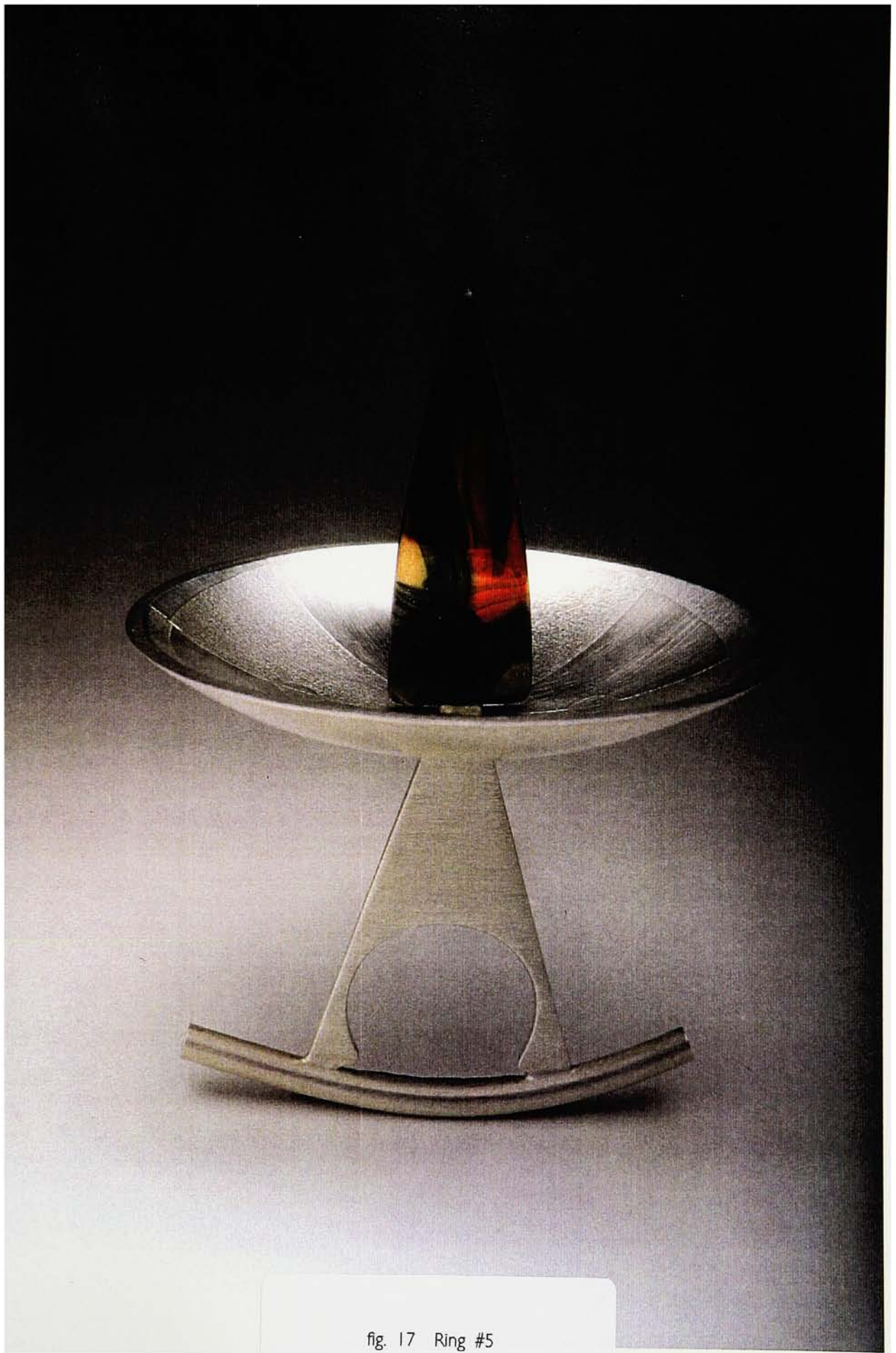


fig. 17 Ring #5

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